The Reference Group Reconsidered*

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IN MY brasher days I used to be extremely critical of Herbert Blumer's seeming penchant for taking an extremely useful term—often an indispensable one—like "attitude" or "variable" or "concept" or "public opinion," skillfully dissecting it, particularly with respect to its current operational uses, and then serving it up to us of the fraternity in all its mangled gore.[1] It seemed to me that the more indispensable an idea had grown to be, the more Professor Blumer was drawn to it with the idea—let us say—of *exposing* it! I was not sympathetic to Professor Blumer's endeavors. I used to try to imagine what kicking and screaming would meet and resist any attempt to drag Professor Blumer into mid-twentieth-century social psychology, so insolent was my youthful assurance that this kind of endeavor of Blumer's was merely a way of avoiding coming to terms with science.

As I examine circumspectly what I hope to do this evening, I cannot help feeling I owe Professor Blumer a good many apologies. It is not that I expect to make mincemeat of the concept of reference group nor that I expect to conduct my re-examination of the concept in anything resembling the elegance of Blumer's prose. It is only that I begin to understand something of Blumer's frustration over the gaps and distortions that so often lie between the imaginative theoretical model—often consensually shared—and the operations used to investigate the empirical world—often, again, universally practiced.

I enter on this enterprise with some trepidation. I am well aware that the reference group has already been reconsidered rather fully by Ralph Turner and Tamotsu Shibutani and in certain

[1] Herbert Blumer, "Attitudes and the Social Act," *Social Problems,* 1955, 3:59–65; "Sociological Analysis and the 'Variable,'" *American Sociological Review,* 1956, 21:683–690; "The Problem of the Concept in Social Psychology," *American Journal of Sociology,* 1940, 45:707–719; "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review,* 1948, 13:542–549.

specific details by a good many others.[2] However, there remain a great many things to be observed about this term and its uses. Indeed when one considers the many controversial matters involved, the term seems considerably underexamined rather than overexamined.

The Other

What I really have in mind to do is to attempt an exploration of the whole *idea of the other* in the symbolic interaction orientation as a context for the consideration of the *idea of the reference group*.

I wish to observe at the outset that while *the other* plays an incontestably crucial role in the conceptions of Cooley, Dewey, Mead, Faris, and the other writers who developed the symbolic interaction orientation, nevertheless *the other* is never attended to with the discerning and analytic interest which they give to the actor. Cooley, Dewey, and Mead all thought of the individual and society as inseparable aspects of the same reality, to use Cooley's phrase. They all shared the idea that meaning, thought, and the self arise alike in the relationships between the actor and his alters.

We are all familiar, I am sure, with Mead's conception that meaning grows out of the gesture of an actor to another, the responding gesture of the other, and the uncompleted phases of the act to which the gestures refer. Thus the omission of the other from these "relata," as Mead calls them, leaves the activity without meaning. Cooley, as we are abundantly aware, saw the self as drawn from the common life—that is, the life of the actor as immersed in a context of others. "The social self," he wrote, "is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own."[3] And his ubiquitously quoted looking-glass—self statement, "A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification,"

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[2] Ralph H. Turner, "Role-Taking, Role-Standpoint, and Reference Group Behavior," *American Journal of Sociology,* 1956, 61:316–328; Tamotsu Shibutani, "Reference Groups as Perspectives," *American Journal of Sociology,* 1955, 60:562–569; "Reference Groups and Social Control," in Arnold M. Rose (ed.), *Human Behavior and Social Processes,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962, pp. 128–147.

[3] Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order,* New York: Scribner's 1902, p. 179.

quite apparently makes the others the looking glass in which one is able to be an object to himself, and without which he would lack even self-feelings.[4] The self is indeed only an eddy of the general communicative current.

Thinking, for all the symbolic interactionists, is an internal conversation among the self and internalized others. And the meaning of internalization is simply the covert segment of the general communicative process. The figures of speech differ—an internal audience, an inner forum, a covert conversation of gestures —but the meanings coincide. They all make the other crucial to the self and to meaningful action.

Cooley insisted on the reality of the internalized other. Again universally quoted is his statement that "the imaginations which people have of one another are the solid facts of society," and he went on to say that "to observe and interpret these must be a chief aim of sociology."[5] He insisted on this idea, and extended it to say that the imaginative idea is logically prior—as far as the actor is concerned—in reality to the physical organism of the other. He wrote, for example, that "I do not see how any one can hold that we know persons directly except as imaginative ideas in the mind," and "a corporeally existent person is not socially real unless he is imagined."[6] In fact he says, after rhetorically raising the question about the reality of the dead and of fictional characters: "I should say that in so far as we imagine them they are [real]."[7]

The well-known notions of Mead regarding the process by which the self arises in taking the role of the other similarly stress this internally imagined other of Cooley's. For both, "the social person is primarily *a fact in the mind*."[8]

The elder Faris, in his not-so-well-known critique of the concept of the primary group, expresses much the same set of ideas when he disparages the notion that the quality of face-to-face existence is a necessary attribute of the primary group relation. In fact he

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 184.   [5] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 123.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 122. It should be noted that Cooley took pains to dissociate this stance from any overtones of naive solipsism, in the following disclaimer: "In saying this I hope I do not seem to question the independent reality of persons or to confuse it with personal ideas. The man is one thing and the various ideas entertained about him are another; but the latter, the personal idea, is the immediate social reality, the thing in which men exist for one another and work directly upon one another's lives." (*Ibid.*, pp. 123–124.)

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 124.

invokes Cooley's own ideas endemic to these several quotations I have given, in suggesting that Cooley himself must have had in mind the essential characteristic of identification with the others as the basic condition for the existence of the primary group. "If there is group consciousness, esprit-de-corps—a feeling of 'we'— then we have a primary group that will manifest attitudes appropriate and recognizable." [9]

Subsequently, Harry Stack Sullivan made similarly crucial use of the other in his formulation. His "significant other" is not basically different in its reference from Mead's other. His self, resting on "reflected appraisals of others," is very much the same self as the self of Cooley or Dewey or Mead. His analysis of communications and interpersonal relations reflect his professional focus on misunderstandings, distortions and anxiety, but otherwise his notions are very similar to those of the earlier interactionists. [10]

We might go further to explore Mead's use of the other in the constituting of *social objects*—the "things" of experience—or in the formation of the generalized other, the abstract principles of conduct. But these really but extend his general notion that the other is crucial to the rise of all meaning, all reality. [11]

Kimball Young in one of several definitions of the *social act* defined it as any act which is qualified by the act of another. [12]

Such, in brief summary, is the role of the other in the symbolic interactionist orientation. The other turns out to be the other as the actor sees him. But the actor's own view of himself is gained only through the image he imagines the other to have of him. His objects, his reality in short, derive from the same source of shared perspectives with imagined others. Even his conscience and his purposes arise in the same process. But the imagination as a process has a solid basis in communication, being in effect the very process of communication by which meaning exists in his social group. "We are able to act together because we are able to take one another's point of view." There is a singularity, unity and con-

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[9] Ellsworth Faris, "The Primary Group: Essence and Accident," Chapter 4 in Faris, *The Nature of Human Nature*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937. Quotation from p. 40.

[10] Harry Stack Sullivan, *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry*, Washington, D.C.: W. A. White Psychiatric Foundation, 1940. See especially pp. 18–22.

[11] George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934. See especially pp. 117–125, 152–164, and 375–377.

[12] Kimball Young, *Personality and Problems of Adjustment* (2nd edition), New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1952, p. 154.

sensus, in this point of view, because the symbols on which it rests are significant symbols: they call out in the actor the incipient anticipations of the responses they call out in the other. In short, they have common *universal referents,* with only moderate exception and qualification.

Now there is nothing much that is incorrect in this orientation as far as we know. But by very virtue of the fact that it is only an orientation, it suffers many shortcomings as a basis for a social psychology.

To be more specific: By what process do one's others get selected? Are any features of this process accessible to observation? Is this a process characterized by regularities, and if so of what kind? Or are we to take the mechanism of identification to be essentially whimsical and capricious?

Cooley wrote that we must imagine the imaginings of the members of the groups we wish to study. This is not a very complete recipe for research, nor does its flavor suggest much that is compatible with contemporary notions of social psychological investigation. Is all social investigation to be limited to the ambiguities and imprecisions of *Einfühlung* and *Verstehen?* To speak of the inseparability of self and other, as many of these early writers did, is not very helpful except in a broadly explanatory way. We would want to have some verifiable ways of discovering just who the others are from whom the self is inseparable.

Thus, while we are led through the cogent rhetoric of the early writers to accept the crucial importance of the subjective life and of the covert features of experience, we are given by them relatively few leads on how to make this subjective life accessible to observation or systematic inquiry. Mead rightly caricatured J. B. Watson for ordering "off with their heads" respecting all problems having to do with covert events such as thought, meaning, purpose, self and the like; [13] yet in retrospect one must credit Watson for insisting on the necessity for empirical demonstrability of generalizations, i.e., the "openness of evidence."

The Reference Group Concept

In 1942 Herbert Hyman proposed the reference group concept in his monograph "The Psychology of Status." [14] The concept is

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[13] Mead, *op. cit.,* pp. 2–3.
[14] In *Archives of Psychology,* vol. 269.

a simple one. It assumes that people make fundamental judgments and self-assessments based on psychological identifications rather than on formal memberships in groups. So stated there is nothing about the idea that in any way differentiates it from the general phenomenological position of symbolic interactionists. His research use of the idea, however, was in terms of the self-assignments to *social categories* of his subjects. There was thus in the operationalization of the term a rotation of the sociological conception of the *group*. This conception has it that a *group* involves reciprocal role-playing, a common vocabulary, and a common body of values and norms. In fact, it is the nearly ubiquitous assumption of sociologists in their use of the term *group* that group membership is predicated upon some degree of group *identification*.

The reference group concept did not come immediately to the attention of sociologists. It remained for Merton and Kitt, in their widely known chapter published in 1950 on the utilization of the reference group idea by Stouffer and associates in *The American Soldier*, to introduce sociologists to the term.[15] They took the concept of "relative deprivation," used in *The American Soldier*, as an example of a special and effective use of Hyman's reference group concept. The "Continuities in Research" volume, *Studies in the Scope and Method of "The American Soldier,"* was—and continues to be—widely distributed and widely read. The Merton-Kitt chapter is one of the most persuasive and influential chapters in the book. Since then the chapter, together with another attempting to revise and to take into account criticisms, has appeared in the revised and enlarged edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure,* a collection of Robert Merton's papers, another influential, widely distributed book.[16]

In the meantime the idea had been having its impact on the psychological social psychologists, many of whom have a considerable audience among sociologists—men such as Sherif, Newcomb and others.[17]

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[15] Robert K. Merton and Alice S. Kitt, "Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behavior," in Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld (eds.), *Continuities in Social Research: Studies in the Scope and Method of "The American Soldier,"* Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950, pp. 40–105.

[16] Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (revised edition), Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957, Chapters 8 and 9.

[17] Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif, *An Outline of Social Psychology* (revised edition), New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956; Theodore M. Newcomb, *Social Psychology,* New York: Dryden Press, 1950.

With such sponsors as Robert Merton, Theodore Newcomb, Muzafer Sherif, and, by implication, the late Sam Stouffer and his associates, it is little wonder the concept enjoyed—as one observer put it—a meteoric rise in popularity. This popularity has endured.

The persistence of the popularity of this concept does not owe entirely to the prestige of its initial users. First of all, it was proposed at the time when survey research was just coming into large-scale use by sociologists and social psychologists on the sociological side. The operationalizations by Hyman and by Stouffer and associates were peculiarly adapted to use in survey research. That is to say, the operationalizations were in the form of simple questions regarding self-assignment to social categories or regarding comparisons of self with members of such categories. They were questions that were neither particularly subtle nor likely to arouse sensitivities. The demonstrations of their validity could be made through the use of other, similar questions, obviating the need for indirect, open-ended, probing or depth forms of inquiry—kinds of inquiry not at all well adapted to large-scale survey research. And while the establishment of their validity by means of this tactic of "triangulation" left necessary a certain amount of inference, this inference could easily be of the open and direct form rather than the ambiguously varied and idiosyncratic or secretive or *ad hoc* Freudian form of logically unverifiable inference. But the very fact that the inference used in these operationalizations of the reference group concept was relatively open to verification has itself tended to obscure the correlative fact that it has not, to this day, yet been concretely verified.

A second reason for the persistence in popularity of the concept (as well as for its meteoric acceptance, for that matter) was the fact that the concept represents a vast simplification and fairly sharp specification of the idea of the other. When we canvass the notion of the other as we did earlier, we can appreciate how many directions one might go with the translation the perspective into concrete inquiry. There is always some mental relief associated with the implication in any operation that a broad and elliptical idea is "nothing but" these marks on these pieces of paper. Such relief tends to shut the mind to further logical examination of the idea involved.

This is especially true when the operation in question has even one or a few strong logical connections with the logical or orienta-

tional idea, which in this case is undeniable. It is not only undeniable, but it is called forcefully to the attention of all readers of the Merton-Kitt commentary in a section in which the reference group concept (and its use by Stouffer under the aegis of the notion of relative deprivation) is compared with the general *idea of the other* as formulated by Mead.[18] These authors suggest that the empirical use of the reference group concept and the auxiliary one of relative deprivation will enable conceptual clarification, reformulation, and useful elaboration of earlier ideas of the other. Their analysis, in their own view, yields several instances of such: e.g., (1) they find that under certain circumstances men "report . . . the objective situation rather than a socially reflected image";[19] (2) they find a sharp discrepancy between operations that inquire into "attitudes" and those which elicit "self-images";[20] and (3) they find that there are multiple reference groups which provide contexts for evaluations by individuals—some of which are conflicting and some of which are mutually sustaining.[21]

Now it may well be that sometimes a human being confronts reality directly while at other times he sees only a socially reflected image. But if this is so, there is no continuity here between the earlier formulations of Cooley, Dewey, Mead, Faris, Thomas, Blumer, *et al.*, for the whole epistemology of symbolic interaction, from Cooley to Cassirer, rests on the proposition that language is necessarily interposed between man and raw reality so that he can *never* confront it directly. If reference group theory rests on some new and different epistemology, that epistemology ought to be spelled out. It cannot rest purely on a pair of empirical findings without explanation.

But this gives one pause. The idea of the reference group is that it is a special kind of other, one with which a person feels psychologically identified as opposed to one with which he is merely socially associated. Yet this was the idea central to the concept of the other (or of the group, for that matter) all along. Are we now to think in terms of two kinds of others—those whose

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[18] Merton, *op. cit.*, pp. 236–241. It is interesting to note that it is in this very passage that Merton and Kitt make a resounding pass at Mead and his followers by observing that Mead's theory "was not exposed to *systematic* empirical evidence" and that he, with "those of his followers who also eschew empirical research, had little occasion to move ahead to the question of conditions under which non-membership-groups may also constitute a significant frame of reference." (*Ibid.*, p. 239).

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 257.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 253.   [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 241–250.

behavior qualifies ours, and those who are merely physically real? Where does this *new* distinction differ from that in Cooley's corridor illustration?

Then, too, what shall we make of the difference between an attitude and a self-image? What is meant by the self as being an object to oneself if it is not that the self *is attitudes*—symbolic proposals for action toward or with respect to the self? And of what use is the self in any theoretical formulation unless it is the anchoring object in one's system of objects? The crucial object with respect to which the other objects have meaning? The victorious manner in which Merton and Kitt "discover" this distinction between attitude and self-image seems to imply that they are happy to be able to *dismiss all consideration* of self-image as of no significance to their research interests. If the self has no relevance to their theory of action, again what continuity is there between the symbolic interaction orientation and reference group theory? For certainly the self is central to all social acts as Mead, Dewey and Cooley saw the matter. One behaves in terms of the kind of person he thinks he is, and for the ends such a person seeks. If "reference groups," operationalized as researcher-proposed, subject-accepted reference *categories,* do not yield meaningful results having to do with the self, is it perhaps that the operationalization has netted relatively insignificant or superficial others as opposed to the ones on which the self is based?

And is not this suspicion strengthened by their third conceptual reformulation—that of multiple reference groups, sometimes conflicting, sometimes mutually reinforcing? It is indeed very plausible that one finds his own categories of self-assignation sometimes conflicting. It is even probable that groups, with which he finds himself only moderately identified or only situationally committed, present such conflicting claims. Yet one supposes the others on which his self-conception crucially rests are only rarely or occasionally such as to put him under such cross-pressures.

However, it ought to be evident that this third proposal, unlike the other two, is not a theoretical or logical discontinuity with earlier symbolic interaction notions. There has always been uncertainty in the formulations about the consistency of the others (cf. Mead's problematic others as making development of the generalized other itself problematic)[22] and the stability of the

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[22] Mead, *op. cit.,* pp. 307–311.

self (cf. Anselm Strauss' notion that self shifts with each episode).[23] It is only possibly—in my view probably—a quantitative overstatement of the likelihood of inconsistency and conflict among others.

Group and Category in Symbolic Interactionism

Since so much is being made here of the prevalence of social categories in reference group operationalization, it is desirable to pause and examine the significance of social categories in symbolic interaction theory. In this theory they are not conceptualized as social categories but must be searched for in other guises.

The social group is paramount for the theory in that it provides both the language through which interaction takes place and the mutual others with whom interaction occurs. The group is antecedent to the individual and so is its language (from a basic standpoint this is redundant, since the group exists *in* its communication). As a new individual is inducted into the group, he takes on its objects, whose attributes derive from the group's communicative categories. That is to say, the qualities of objects which are meaningful to the group in its ongoing activity must be contained as distinctions in its vocabulary. Otherwise one could not perceive objects differentially in terms of these qualities. The most important objects to the ongoing, mutually reciprocal role activity of the group are human beings. The lexical categories that refer to them make possible differential discernment of the kinds of people there are and the differential activity that may be directed toward them or with respect to them. Universal categories, found in all groups, are age and sex. Thousands of other categories exist, many of them unique to particular groups. In fact, there is no logical limit to the number of categories that might exist. Cultural relativism as an idea may be fairly well summed up in terms of the culturally unique categories which exist in specific societies—particularly for human actors. The self of a given person is in part a set of assignments of the self to relevant categories. But these assignments reflect group assessments: in the *broad,* because there is but one vocabulary to use; in the *specific,* because one cannot behave conjointly with others without consensus on one's assignment to categories (or put another way, without consensus on one's possession of role-relevant attributes).

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[23] Anselm Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks,* Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959. See especially Chapters 3 and 4.

Thus *category membership* is in any social system a *derivative* matter. It is the *group* or groups with whom one feels identified which are the source of the very vocabulary creating the categories and their meanings. Therefore, the other with whom one has a we-feeling, that is, a self which includes him, is an altogether different kind of other than the one with whom one shares a similar age or sex or number of years of overseas service. The dynamics for the support or modification of the self and, therefore, the dynamics for the organization and redirection of action, *lie* in one's *group relationships*. They will only *refer* to his category assignments.

It is difficult to look into the vocabulary of one's own society with any likelihood of finding generic differentia among its categories which will be instructive in delineating the processes of which I have just been speaking. The vernacular yields a rich bag of terms by which we regularly differentiate among our others and with respect to the different ways we confront them. A small but completely unsystematically assembled sampling of them from my own smattering recollection gives the following: dutch uncle; wet hen; party pooper; blood brother; traitor; hypocrite; snob; underdog; lover; sissy; man; other members of the team; final oral committee; old maid (of either sex); someone in the same boat (used in *The American Soldier*); sucker; the Joneses; pig; hero; clown; cry-baby; lion; mouse; boon companion; financial angel; sidewalk superintendent; customer; having somebody as one's "property" (e.g. a movie star); operator; promoter. Words for *collectivities of others* include: audience; forum; clique; the boys; guys like me; committee; cabinet; huddle; rescue team; them bums; the officials; passersby; mob; the crew; those cave-dwellers.

How can one distill from these any generic classes of others? I do not think one can. One *can*, however, make a beginning by starting with such elementary distinctions as those based on time, continuity, physical and social space, and the like: we can differentiate present others from absent others; proximal others from distal others; contemporary others from past others; continuous others from intermittent others; in-category from out-category others; immediate, impulsive, passing others from considered others. Behind these proffered distinctions lie testable hypotheses of considerable importance for the extension of symbolic interaction theory. It is simple to see what these might be, so I will not

burden you with specific formulations of them. One cannot help acknowledging the debt symbolic interaction theory has to reference group theory, if only in the demonstration that the problem of the other may be approached systematically and empirically. But the examination of regularities with respect to the implicit hypotheses in the distinctions I suggested may not necessarily be best approached through survey research. It is especially important—given the assumptions of symbolic interactionism—to note what amounts to an aside made by Merton and Kitt to the effect that it is important to find out *what others the subject himself will give most saliently*—that is, presumably in answers to open-ended questions.[24] Although this kind of question may be used in survey research, it is the kind of question which evidently requires other forms of inquiry for the validation of its answers and to provide a broad base of understanding for their meaning.

It may be that some kind of orderliness lies in a possible hierarchy with which an actor holds—and invokes—his others. This kind of notion best fits the mechanistic models of Parsons and Homans and learning theory of several varieties. It tends to be incompatible with the all-or-none types of others envisaged in symbolic interactionism—others whose importance to one's self-conception rests on inclusion in groups with which one's self is coextensive and inclusive.

The dramatistic model of Burke, Goffman, Duncan and others suggests a process of casting acquaintances in various roles of others, depending on the kind of act to be presented and the circumstances and audience involved.[25] Such a casting process presents complexity which baffles imaginative attempts to categorize aspects and procedures for the purposes of finding regularities about which one might form useful generalizations. Much introspective experience supports the use of this model. We ought to be reminded that sociological inquiry must be directed toward events as they occur rather than toward fictions that please or seem to represent efficiencies or economies of investigation. It would be an error to create models of processes from a consideration of the

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[24] Merton, *op. cit.*, pp. 249–250.
[25] Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945; Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959; and Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order*, New York: Bedminister Press, 1962.

tools we have readily available for research rather than from a consideration of the evidences of the processes we already have available for examination. If there is further evidence that we cast our others on the basis, not of conditioned or habitual experience, but at least partially on the basis of anticipated self-fulfillment by or in others of traits, qualities and potentialities for enactment, then the notions of hierarchy may not be at all relevant.

One of the claimed advantages of the reference group concept, as far as it was employed in such a study as *The American Soldier,* is that it enables us to examine the regularities with which social structure influences the creation and invocation of others, particularly in the process of self-evaluation and in the development of attitudes of relative deprivation. This is a cogent argument, deserving serious examination. It would seem, however, that if the major regularities of individual behavior hang on categorical memberships in social systems, there is little need for a social psychology in general or for the concept of the other in particular. The intervening factors between system regularity and individual regularity are in the nature constants rather than of variables. One need not pry open the lid of the little black box or even worry about what's in it. It is when systems crosscut, or when personality processes and structures deriving from the diversity of past statuses and roles in other systems make difficult the discovery of regular relation between present social system and individual behavior, that we need to understand how the self and self-appraisal work and from whence they derive.

But in our kind of society, cross-cutting memberships are the rule rather than the exception—and so is diversity of past role-playing and past others. Furthermore, the situations in which most people find themselves are seldom so close to the nature of total institutions as those in which the subjects of *The American Soldier* found *themselves.* In such tight circumstances, others presumably are often nearly prefabricated, certainly predesignated, by the norms of the system itself. Independence of judgment and autonomy of conduct are rather uncommon in the services in wartime. It is not such regularized and routinized, subservient and ordered behavior which an understanding of self-conception assists us in understanding. Even the attitudinal reactions to these regularities and routines are to some large degree contained within the con-

trolling framework of the total institution itself rather than being, as they normally are, inclusive of possible elections and choices that would get one to "leave the field," in Lewin's term.

Thus, if a study of the other is to assist us in the general study of social psychology, it has considerably larger tasks to perform in the area of the *lack* of regularity of relation between present social system and individual acts. In my view we have far more use for concepts of self and other, say, in studying the family than in the study of the prison. This is not to say that the concept of other has *no* utility in the study of behavior in the total institution, but that its use is more or less one which inverts that to which it is put by Merton and Kitt.

The Orientational Other

If what I have just suggested makes sense, I should like to advance the implicit idea in it by proposing a new concept—a new category of the other, which I shall call, for want of a better name, *the orientational other*. (It is singular by language convention only. It refers to a social object which may be a single other or a group). I should have preferred to call it by the name of *significant other*, but since that term has become so solidly entrenched in our usage as meaning something not basically different from simply "the other," in Mead's terms, I will suggest the rather less desirable name "orientational other." The orientational other has, in my proposal, four defining attributes: (1) The term refers to the others to whom the individual is most fully, broadly and basically committed, emotionally and psychologically; (2) it refers to the others who have provided him with his general vocabulary, including his most basic and crucial concepts and categories; (3) it refers to the others who have provided and continue to provide him with his categories of self and other and with the meaningful roles to which such assignments refer; (4) it refers to the others in communication with whom his self-conception is basically sustained and/or changed.

This orientational other has some kinship with the concept of the primary self advanced some years ago by Bingham Dai, but Dai's notion begged the essential question of sequence and assumed that the primary self—and presumably the primary others—are necessarily primary in the life trajectory—that is, they are events and objects of infancy and childhood only.[26]

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[26] Bingham Dai, "A Socio-Psychiatric Approach to Personality Organization," *American Sociological Review*, 1952, 17:44–49.

The study of the orientational other would be one which would lie quite at the opposite end of the scale of significance from the study of the reference group. It would attempt, that is, to study the processes by which the self is formed and sustained and to discover if there are regularities in the relation between orientational other and the self which can account *for the discrepancies* between regularities of social system and the phenomena of individual behavior. It would afford the opportunity for inquiry regarding the possible relation between absence or diversity of orientational others and disoriented behavior.

It might be pointed out in conclusion that one has a *history* in his relations with his orientational others, but he has *only spent abstract time* in his social categories. When his reference categories have "come alive" for him, they have done so in terms of vivid role events vis-à-vis his orientational others, not in tilting windmills vis-à-vis all green recruits.

Summary

I know from several oblique comments that Professor Merton believes symbolic interactionists have an orientational aversion to empirical research—and from my own earlier-voiced doubts about Professor Blumer, you can guess that I at least have once *entertained thoughts* that *some* of them do. (Notice my perfidious shift from *us* to *them!*) But I want to remind myself and also Professor Merton that Professor Cooley's early study of the uses of personal pronouns by his children as a clue to the development of the self was one of the earliest empirical studies in social psychology.[27] And Professor Bain's replication of it was one of the earliest replication studies.[28] Now, in these days of survey research and of IBM 7070's, such studies of one's own children are to be looked upon, I suppose, as in the same genre as analysis by introspection! But I digress.

It had never occurred to me until the other day that one might study the other in much the same way that Cooley studied the self —through the use of pronouns by children. My ten-year-old daughter Abigail reported at dinner table the other day that "when she was *very* young and her older brother came home from school

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[27] Charles Horton Cooley, "A Study of the Early Use of the Self-Words by a Child," *Psychological Review*, 1908, 15:339–357.
[28] Read Bain, "The Self-and-Other Words of a Child," *American Journal of Sociology*, 1936, 41:767–775.

to report what 'they' did—she thought 'they' meant little people dressed in white clothes—people about six inches tall who lived under the furniture." Suddenly it occurred to me that questions like "Compared with the chances of promotion for *raw recruits,* what do you think of your chances?" might have something in common with the notion that "they" refers to people under the furniture who wear little white coats. I think perhaps we are in the infancy of our study of the other.

I hope that this—or for that matter, my previous remarks—will not be taken as an indication that I wish to scrap the reference group concept altogether. I do think it should be amended to be the "reference *category*" concept. But I have no intention of suggesting that those who are persuaded by the cogency of the arguments behind it cease their research efforts. My proposal of the concept of *orientational other* was in no sense intended as a proposal of an *alternative* to the reference category concept.

The burden of what I have been attempting to say is that there are serious *dis*continuities between the symbolic interaction orientation and the reference-group concept of the other as it has generally been employed, and that whatever empirical successes have been achieved in its employment are not very large or persuasive when one considers the context of the research—a war, for example, is extraordinarily framed off from the rest of life, both in time and space. It is important to consider and to explore how far reference categories are coextensive with significant others. I have suggested that they may not even be of the same order. I am inclined to think that, if one is to demonstrate that they *are* of the same order, one must demonstrate that reference categories have major importance in the development and maintenance of the self as an object to the person. Ordinarily one keeps himself together and headed in the right direction by remembering who he is. If he remembers saliently that he is a second lieutenant, it is not, dynamically, because all second looies clutch him to their bosoms and think of him as one of them, but because the people with whom he is in a continual interchange of communicative symbols think of him saliently, and in respects significant to the themselves and their mutual interaction, as a second lieutenant. If members of the faculty of the University of Wisconsin are asked, "Compared with those who got their B.A.'s at the University of

Wisconsin, how good do you think your chances for promotion at University of Wisconsin are?" regularities in their responses do not carry proof to me that faculty members there regularly and saliently divide in their self-conceptions between those who think of themselves as University of Wisconsin B.A.'s and "elsewhere B.A.'s."

Yet symbolic interactionism owes a considerable debt to this new development, for it has demonstrated that the other can probably be empirically researched and that it is very likely to be quite important to do so.

If these remarks have seemed excessively concerned with terminological distinctions, it might remind us of Stephen Leacock's wonderful characterization of our whole enterprise: "Ignorance, in its wooden shoes, shuffles around the portico of the temple of learning, stumbling among the litter of terminology. The broad field of human wisdom has been cut into a multitude of little professional rabbit warrens. In each of these a specialist burrows deep, scratching a shower of terminology, head down in an unlovely attitude which places an interlocutor at a grotesque conversational disadvantage."